

Testimony of Josephine Baker
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Chairman Davis and Members of the Committee:

I am Josephine Baker, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB). I thank you for this opportunity to share the Board's perspective on charter schools and the important contributions they are making to public education in the District of Columbia. My involvement in and support of public education in D.C. has been life-long. I am a product of the DC Public School System, as are my three children. Having contributed twenty-five years of service as a DCPS elementary school teacher, I feel I have first-hand knowledge of the importance and value of public education, particularly in this city.

The District of Columbia Public Schools are now presenting evidence that long-sought solutions are working. The reconstituted and transformation schools are showing great promise. Student achievement is improving, faculty morale is at a new high, and parents and community members are encouraged to see the tremendous resources and energy that have been infused into schools that were in the greatest need of transformation. While there is still much work to be done, the evidence suggests that continued support will move the transformation schools, and the public school system, upward to a new heights.

Over the past six years, charter schools have been a significant catalyst for change in our city. They are independently-operated public schools that are open to all District residents, regardless of their neighborhood, ability, socioeconomic status, or academic achievement. There is no exclusivity - no discriminatory admissions tests or other requirements. There are no tuition fees. Parents and students choose to attend a particular charter school because its unique focus, curriculum, structure, size, and other features meet the needs of those families. Charter schools are often created through a collaboration of innovative teachers, parents, and community non-profits. They attract energetic, creative teachers and administrators who are passionate about education and who want to offer an alternative to the traditional school formats. As we move into a new kind of economy, charter schools represent a progressive approach to education that is preparing the next generation to succeed in an information-based society.

In exchange for the greater degree of autonomy charter schools must accept greater accountability. Each school must establish a Board-approved accountability plan as a part of its charter, which is then used to monitor and measure progress. The DC Charter Law gives charter schools 5 years to demonstrate progress toward their accountability plan targets, or risk charter revocation. The PCSB will continue this approach, incorporating NCLB guidelines.

There are 42 charter schools serving more than 12,000 students in the city. That amounts to one in every 7 students in D.C. public schools. The majority of the student populations in the charter schools are from low-income families. Despite the obstacles of inadequate facilities and funding, community demand continues to grow, because of the innovative offerings and the remarkable progress we have seen in student and school achievement. I'll share with you a few of the many examples of success stories:

- Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy, graduated its first class in 2002. 100% of its graduates were accepted to college, receiving over \$1 million dollars in college scholarships, as well as numerous academic honors and awards.
- Maya Angelou Public Charter High School targets adjudicated and drop-out youth, and places great emphasis on building their skills to succeed in college. While they haven't shown particularly impressive SAT-9 scores, students have made significant improvement in SAT scores. This has resulted in a very high % of their students graduating, and attending college on scholarship. So far 70% of those students have remained in college. A small number of students who have extreme need are provided residential accommodations on a space available basis. The school's unique success has earned it a Gates Foundation grant to replicate the concept at other sites in the city.
- The Arts and Technology Academy is an elementary public charter school that inspires their students to excel in academic subjects using the Arts and Technology. Attendance is consistently very high and SAT-9 Math and Reading scores have improved each year – most significantly in its third year (in 2002). 98% of the students are low-income.
- SEED, the only public charter boarding school, provides a nurturing environment for students in grades 7 through 12, and prepares them for college and future careers. SEED seeks out students whose home and neighborhood environments have proven to be barriers to their academic achievement.
- Several of our charter schools offer Saturday, after-school and summer programs that include academic enrichment, community service, music and sports activities and parent training.
- Seven of the nine schools that are now in their fifth year of operation have consistently met their accountability targets since opening. The remaining two schools have submitted improvement plans.
- Nineteen of the twenty-one schools have had an average attendance of approximately 90% or higher.
- Students have earned awards and honors from organizations such as the National Academy of Math and Science, the Washington Post Educational Foundation, Model UN, DC Scholastic Chess Championships, DC Public Defenders, and many others.
- On SAT-9 tests, there was a positive gain in both reading and math across all grades. The elementary schools showed the most impressive gains from the previous year. We have deduced that the earlier and longer children have been in charter schools, the greater their gains have been on the SAT-9. High school

students had the least gains in scores, which can be attributed to the fact they have come to the schools with many more years of academic deficits.

There are many other individual stories about students and schools succeeding against tremendous odds that I haven't shared with you today. Charter school leaders and parents are pushing through and working around tremendous barriers, such as sharing buildings and classrooms with other schools; using church basements, and/or facilities without playgrounds, gymnasiums, kitchens or labs. They are finding creative solutions. In order to meet increasing community demand, many have been forced to spend a large proportion of their funding on expensive building leases in an extremely competitive real estate market. Others are unable to add grades if they cannot find affordable additional space. Often money to fully invest in creative programming, to offer competitive salaries and benefits to teachers, and to provide other needed services is compromised to pay the expensive rental rates. Some schools have been successful in finding private donations, but even that has waned in the recent economic downturns. Despite the many obstacles, many of the charter schools have long waiting lists.

It is exciting to imagine the impact that charter schools would make if not constrained by limited funding. Schools could purchase appropriate facilities and add or update technology and science labs, kitchens, playgrounds, gymnasiums and libraries. Their innovative curricula could be fully implemented with continuous staff and faculty development. Additional services needed by students and their families could be provided. More new schools might be opened. Thousands more students could be enrolled.

It is our contention that any additional federal funding that is available to provide alternatives to public school students would be well spent on charter and transformation schools. Local leaders have invested in and supported these alternatives in recent years, and we are beginning to see positive returns. Now is the time to leverage that investment to benefit a large number of additional students, rather than divert desperately needed funding towards unproven experiments. Federal legislation is not needed to address the educational concerns of this city. What is needed is Federal support of local, publicly accountable alternatives that are already working. We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective and invite your questions.